

How legislative gender quotas affect the gender gap in campaign spending ^[1]

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This is a summary of a research article published in the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* as “How legislative gender quotas affect the gender gap in campaign spending: an analysis of the federal and regional elections in Belgium”. The full text is available [here](#) ^[2].

Existing research on the link between gender and campaign finance in proportional electoral systems, most notably Switzerland and Belgium, suggests that the campaign expenses of female parliamentary candidates are significantly lower than those of male candidates. In these systems women are systematically overrepresented amongst lower positioned candidates, which have only limited chances of winning a seat in parliament. As a consequence, female candidates will be less motivated to run expensive election campaigns. In many countries, however, the introduction of legislative gender quotas substantially increased the number of female candidates in realistic list positions (i.e. high positions on the ballot list that provide realistic chances of getting elected). Hence it can be assumed that these realistic female candidates will become more inclined to match the campaign expenses of their male co-partisans, which in turn decreases the gender gap in campaign spending.

In our article, recently published in the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* ([available here](#) ^[2]), we tackle this puzzle by examining whether there is indeed a gender gap in campaign spending, and in particular whether this coincides with the stepwise introduction of legislative quota laws in the Belgian flexible-list PR system. We focus on the Belgian case as quota regulations have been introduced in three consecutive steps since the second half of the 1990s. Additionally, given the importance of list order in flexible-list PR systems, we distinguish between realistic candidates that run for election from viable list positions and unrealistic candidates running from lower ranked positions. We rely on data on 10,436 election candidates from six parties for nine consecutive elections in Belgium (1991-2014).

The results of our multivariate models show that, among *unrealistic* candidates, female candidates have always been outspent by male candidates, apart from the first election with only limited gender quotas (i.e. 1999). This gender gap thus did not disappear over time. Among unrealistic candidates, the introduction of legislative gender quotas has thus not closed the gender gap in campaign spending. With regard to *realistic* list positions, we also find elections where sex had a significant effect on spending. These findings are nevertheless more hopeful: in the long run it seems that the gender gap in campaign spending among realistic candidates has disappeared, indicating that female realistic candidates were able to catch up financially with their male counterparts.

Female candidates in realistic positions measure up to their male counterparts, but at the same time women are still underrepresented in these positions. The limited number of women assigned to realistic positions reveals an ongoing reluctance of party elites to equally support female candidates in the electoral process, hampering the evolution towards a more equal political representation of women. Consequently, our results suggest that other flexible-list PR systems considering the introduction of legislative gender quotas should impose strict rules on party elites for realistic list positions from the very start. Any type of provisional phase with voluntary rules will continue to provide leeway to circumvent furthering gender equality.

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[2] <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2018.1446143>